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Mare and other poems

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Mare and other poems

by

Alan Keith Christy

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

Iowa State University
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iv

DEDICATION

To

the memory of

Florence Chace

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I wish to thank Drs. Will C. Jumper, Richard C. Gustafson, and John W. Elrod for serving on my committee. Also I would like to thank my wife, Melba, my committee-members, and Rachel MacMaster Lowrie for providing honest and intelligent criticism of my poetry.

MARE

"Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"--
Walt Whitman

We slump across her back and finally relax,
To float on the sleeping sea horse,
The same rocking horse which spilled us forward once onto the
earth,

With nostrils snorting salt and prancing in wet sand, she
bucked us off.

We have shied away since.

Shaken, we walked inland then and loved walking for the long-
est time;

The plains were lovely and the long-armed sky held the ground
up for us,

But stopping in the mountains our own footstep-sound echoed
in our ears and ached;

To escape we varied paces and fell from the heights by running,
But the sound continued through the ear plugs of desert sand.

We stepped across a changing continent
To find the horse we fled from;
The same horse, only sleeping, only on another shore.
Perhaps we will ride the night.

We slump and the sound in our ears finally fades.

THE TWO OF YOU

Your quiet eyes are seeing a long way.
What you know borrows the hidden rhythms of night,
And out of your eyes first, then covered with words
It goes to meet her waiting silence halfway.
Outside, rain sinks the ground into the ground.
You speak to her of angled space as you paint,
She uses your brush to add squares of sunshine.
Time's arms have lifted you both up and dropped you,
You will float down together into morning.

CYCLES

Fall feet-first into sleeping sickness
And then rise head-first
Into looking all around

Be surprised once only to decide
The place in your mind
Is past where green plants arise

Then after miles of meaningless signs
You find a whole field
Of lost wild flowers alive

GRANDMOTHER'S CRYSTAL

The late-night storm shakes
The house, waking the old woman.
Slowly finding the button of the lamp,
She pushes it but the dark remains.
She bends to pull open the night-
Stand drawer.

She reaches
The flashlight, grips it and clicks;
Cradling reassurance she moves
Her hand and watches as the room proves
To hold still a battery of belongings.

The storm quiets. Now she sees
The portrait, now the patterned carpet.

All startling storms
Seem but one,
Culminating in thundering
Passed through her past.

The storm-renewed sky cracks,
Her bones ache, wanting to drop,
The bedroom flickers, dark-stopping

A moment as the small guiding circle
Passes from patterns to wooden planks.

Broad oaks
Stand with their vertical
Bark-wrapped
Grain flowing.

Once there was white silk
And soft tears and spinning.

But storms come
Quickly spinning
Dark clouds.

In the chair at the roll-top desk
She lifts and allows the light to catch
The cloth calendar of months and birds
Singing only of one time.
The agate she picks from the bowl
Of polished stones sparkles and feels
Cold and smooth against her palm.

Rocks like bones,
Some brittle,

Some flow.

Among rocks,
Or drifting and wandering,
Plankton stirred
By waves or feet
Or ships becomes
The ocean's living
Flashlights.

In the dimness her hand touches down
On the tray full of pencils and rings.

Diamonds and graphite,
Atoms of carbon,
Sets of arranged
Flashing crystals.

Crystals grow,
Atoms bond,
Lights flash,
Glass flows.

The wooden owl watches the room,
The Canadian carving with its bark base

And its eyes discovered rings of pine.

In the northern night
A wild owl's
Claws circle
The bark of an uncut,
Uncarved tree.

She turns slowly passing the light
Across the wall, under the owl
To the shining window-sill plants.
The rain's rhythm quickens again.
Glass flows in the window panes
And in the glass doors of the China closet
Where the light now shines through to find
Bright salt shakers sitting
With blown-glass bottles on shelves
With the cherished pattern-cut crystal,
The staring white China doll
And the sparkling green fishing float.

Crystals of salt
Spin in waves
And float heavy
Near the Azores

To buoy up
Sailors in the warm
Water of the sharks
High above
The ridges of under-
Water mountains.

Sea storms
Bring glass
Fishing floats
From Japan--
Current-sent
To the Oregon beach,
Flowing as they float.

The doll was Mother's once,
She was white-faced too.

At the desk again the light surrounds
A praying figure she had formed and baked.
Picking it up and imagining her hands,
She smiles and moves from side to side.

Dough from fields
Where wheat moves
Flown by wind.

Blown and cut
Wheat and glass,
Blown and cut
Stone and grass,
Crystals and plants
Cultivated in and out of jars.

She brushes dust from the back of the desk
And from the top of thin paged books.

Flat rocks
On the coast are cleaned
And swept by salt
And wind and waves.

Carefully walking bedward again,
Pointing and following the dim circle,
She returns to the patterned carpet.
As the storm stops, the flashlight fails,
Batteries burned and generation gone.

Oh, I remember!
Don't I remember
All, all of them
Now, now and then.

The room seems to tilt and tip
Until the floor forms her relief.

Somewhere
In the eye-blinking
Star-shooting
Night,
Designs
Of snow fall.

REDUCTIO

That oh so up is
down bound and
will half fly run laughing
right off
its own ledge
and fall fast
past itself
into out

STILL LIFE

Alive and well she
Walks semi-dance steps,
Always letting subtle
Changes in her
Shadow's pace appear
To remind sidewalks:
Silhouettes of joy still
Occur on their
Surfaces after
Straight and solemn ghosts;
And movement is still in
Time when she stops.

GROUNDING

Climbing Kierkegaard's stair
Near the top you are self-stopped
At a new floor with many rooms
But only three possibilities.
Despair hangs batlike and vibrating
From the inner ceiling of your head;
You have watched its ways with knowing eyes.
Its sightless flight is tied to yours.
Its black radar will home where you choose:
 Hanging deeper back
 Or trading you its upsidedown
 Or rewinged in colored flight.

I. The Square Hallway

An escape attempt to flee this knowledge
And overtake the days with planning
And orgies eating up your time--
 In the dizzy night's feast
 You stuff your infinity
 Into immediacy's mouth,
But your finitude too is swallowed
And lies in the stomach with infinity.
Digested together they become the new

Moment's life blood
And the same stage is back.

II. Through a Room Head-First

You empty out your last cries
And call into the night voiceless
To complete the final frustration of your cycle,
 Replacing screams with tears,
 Anger with an aching chest,
 Allowing your self to collapse
 On the floor--unclenching your fist.
Frightful laughter springs from your tears.
As you crawl for the window a new cycle
Of even more horrible sounds
 Precedes your dark thud.

III. The Standing-Still Dream

Aware of impotence, giving-up
Relinquishes control as you leap
Into maybe-chaos trusting,
 Sinking. Floating-down
 Light rays bounce
 Past yet linger.
The bat now becomes the bird.

The colors fill your inside up
And vaster radar brings you down
 To stand gracefully as yourself--
 Finite, infinite and free.

IV. The Stair Down

Why was the Dream not realized?
Where were the first joyful colors found?
You took no love to infinitize.
 Regina and the earth are behind
 Where you left the snowflake tingling.
 Going back to look
 Into human eyes,
 Now knowing your need,
 Again you leap and trust
 Inside-out into
 Maybe-chaos or loss;
 But on earth with someone
 Building skyward
 A blue-yellow at a time.

KILLING AIR

Strands of the walked-through web cling
And the spider air follows across your face
After eyes which cannot fly.

Living mocks birth as our bones want loose.
Skin is the price of the severed cord.
The spider feeds.

Defiantly we fight the speeding air,
The plants survive;
But success for us is suffocation.

Our nervous system spreads
And wavers inside
In arachnoid obedience to the wind.

DAUGHTER WITH BONSAI

She grows determined
As horizontal bonsai
In imitation of birds:
Ancient likenesses,
Oriental arrangements,
Blossoming music in thirds;
High, low, in-between--
Heaven, earth, growing being.

Somewhere rocks, soils, come alive.
Careful, ageless eyes
Turn verticals to merge lines,
Making centers coincide
And deny progress,
Painting the oldest pictures.

The rock gardens bear minor
Miracles beyond
Paper walls' subtle colors
While we, half consumed by our
Blurring skill and speed,
Slow and stand in awe watching
As she moves to touch the tree,

Which grows much slower,
But in the same direction.

CITY MAN, 30,
.....

The bitch is big with pups, and warm air, rich
In paradox, parallels pain. Alone
Upstairs his mind, echoing bitterness,
Is half believing in the evening, half
Believing in the barrel's pressure, cold
Behind his eyes.

The bitch's fur is soft
As her teeth are sharply sinking into him.
Does destruction seek renewal, aid creation?
The water color runs beyond intention,
Spreading a foreign shade: We paint in the rain,
Yet claim to control. He notices too much
Of what he must cover to stay with us.

Will the bitch, rabid, twist to bite the cord?
Or does it matter? Seeking metal help
He finally exacts the frightening cost
Of integrity. The shattering shot stops
His eyes and the gun drops

and the bitch starts.

THE LECTURE

Damn the hammers and the dull chalk
Cutting through my skull.
How does one begin a class
With these double-negatives of noise?

This is the wrong slide
Just a minute please--
Those realistic flowers
Collide--

But before the slides
Look outside:
The crows begin
To teach us awe today,
Shadow our earth,
Fill the grey sky
With sharp uncanny caws,
Which sink to scratch our ears
As the wings' shadows tear
Across the browning grass--

Now the slide--
Who slashed black

Above these yellow fields?
You are not permitted much time:
Who was this artist defining
By not including,
Because the caws
Were exploding his ear?

And what then--when we can't hear?
Must we see and share our seeing,
An end before the end?

What then--when we can't see?
Must we be attentive,
To find by ear a dark and strange
Blind beginning?

What then--when we can't touch a brush or paint,
Or move strings to create?
What when we can't feel skin
Or touch--or touch?
Enter our own minds backwards then--
Handless, stumbling, waking our sleep
Until we fall in sleep and cannot wake?
And what bottom will we hit?
Will our voice be blasted from us?

And will some other, somewhere, speak
Describing us as having been
So lovely, though bizarre,
Before he knows the crow?

Turn the projector off.
Stop projecting.

No--you are witness--
Is this the way it was?
Did you see into the raven's mouth?

Wait, two more slides--
You know the man at least in this one.
Gauguin's yellow Christ
Is stretched
Like an extension
Of the earth--

Last week we saw how
Grunewald changed
His incredible face
Into pain
Where it belonged,
Asking human time

Its nature

And allowing the answer

To be grotesque:

Arms stretch

Weight hangs

Flesh is flesh

Faces won't fail to reveal it.

Expressions aren't exempt.

Whosoever claims allegiance falsely,

Whosoever fails to deliver personal messages,

Whosoever abuses, tortures, or confines,

Causes that face to stare,

Outside-in, inside-out,

Aware only of despair.

Close the book--for God's sake close the book

On these morbid painters.

No--we must go through the mug-shots--

You must find the face

For you have seen him--You are the witness.

Look at these expressions--

Here is a three-time loser.

Is he the one? Are you the one?

One more slide then.

You in the first row

Stare at Magritte's

Suspended globe

As though you had found

A forty-foot red ball

In an otherwise vacated field.

Is he the one?

Is that it?

Go in there and stand on the globe

In the air.

Can you see us now?

He can't speak you see--

We could keep him in our book, page forty-three.

Who goes there?

Wait, before you go,

Have you been remiss?

Hang it up.

Hang yourself

In the air

Without rope

Linger there

Or vanish

Who cares

As long as you make the identification first.

Here's a slide--a reproduction--Whose painting is it?

Notice the style

Notice the eye

Identify

You may leave the earth

As long as you reproduce first

Put nothing smaller

Than your elbow

In your ear.

Consider yourselves dismissed.

AWAKENING

We had dog gods then--
Till a flower woke us up
From a running dream,
Announcing another way,
Buzzing stasis
And vulnerability

As if fragility were
Better than scar-eared
Mobility.

We were picked
Within an hour.

YOU HAVE AN AUGUST HEAD FOR THINGS.

You have an August head for things.
You have stolen July
Just when the rain and sun
Beat the forest to life
Before your eyes
And your Janus face has eyes
Looking out of August both ways,
Laughing now at the snow
You have palmed to reveal at the coming magic show
And staring back sadly at the big birth;
And just when they think they know your tricks
You turn around, smiling, and give back July with a laugh
And frown toward January,
Like the runaway you are,
Approaching the fireless hearth of home.

MARKING TIME

I

What you've said just now
Is like blaming yourself for having blood.
So what if you're only thirty?
And what if you do waver for now
Between weariness and fear?

Justice eludes us
And lamenting's validity
Depends upon each history and vision.

How much have you seen, do you see?
How long has it been
And what is the duration of your present moment?
How much have you thought, do you think?
When were you pressed in upon yourself
With no possible relief?
What sort of chords are struck, resounding in your head?
Minor, major, quick, loud or sustained?
What physical signs of strains emerge?
What absolute handicaps did birth bestow you with?

Balance this with your joy if you have it.

Consider the silent residue of repressions.

How much do you hate yourself? (Trite question.)

Trite questions echoing into enormous proportions.

Are you deceived?

Do you imagine this so-called deceit to be rendered unreal if
you feel it?

Are you more or less relieved by understanding guilt?

Have you kept windows open

Or shut up your singing?

Do you hang chimes out of whim or decision?

Gently, safe from strong wind

Or in draughty circles?

Do your knuckles whiten,

Your legs quiver uncontrollably?

Shivering, can you stand?

Can you stand it?

Does compulsion strike,

Demanding hollow acts of you?

But this arc began with age

And I was to speak of the invisible bottom of our circle,

The other arc drawn at a different rate.

What keeps you from interrupting, intersecting?

Gather your geometry.

Have you parallels or angles?

Don't you habitually sit

In corners and darkness?

You could design oblivion

With broken lines.

But before you do,

And since your hesitation and silence is itself a beginning,

Let's hunt for feelings

In tightened phrases and ancient patterns

To see if echoes in the caves can still speak,

Providing clues.

Let's listen to tormented visions,

Going back to our subject oblivion,

Our being subject to oblivion.

II

Some children go their way

Carrying imaginary games

Into the yellow afternoons.

They become estranged from the groups
Which fast lose track of the earth.
But their visions grow less serene;

They see the quick apocalypse--
The picture moon
Suddenly screams
Into the reddened sea
Where ships crack
And bubbling water splashes the sky,
Drowning the star's whiteness,
Singeing the night,
And splintering the brittle blue-black clouds,
Which crack along the smallest,
Most complex lines,
Then drop to pierce
The sea-bottom's sand
And open up the molten
Center of the earth.

They see the black soil
Bide its time and hate the moon
For mirroring the frozen white
Which spreads across the earth's surface,
Breaking trees and invading veins.

But in early spring they see
The budless branches' darkness
Make the blue above more blue.

So these children grow
To sing their minds and suffering sights,
Unschoolled in permanence.
They know the earth will fill their pores,
But they sing and scream,
They speak and dream.

III

So why the drastic act?
Change will still change you.
It's a matter of time,
Of listening to the chords,
Of hanging chimes,
And of consciously spinning the globe,
Before leaving the room,
Obscuring boundaries,
Sustaining motion,
And lending a small echo
To the ancient secrets
In the air.
For it isn't only individual;

Visions come from the blood and the world.
We return with phrases from the fringe.
We listen for the echo
Of ancient feelings,
Perspectives insistently ambiguous.

How much do you see, do you see?
Enough to scream the corners inside out
And echo away to absorb a new silence?

THE MASK OF AGAMEMNON

The memory of Agamemnon

Ends with a body

Lying still, among startled companions

Who stare, waiting for breath,

Who wonder where their avengers are.

Lie still Agamemnon, your prophetess follows.

Lie cloaked in gold

As they decorate your death.

Watch the smoke from below

As some men watch the sea.

Lie as still as your daughter, Agamemnon.

Now your bony gold face

Confronts me,

Your eyes above a long narrow nose

Capture another companion.

I wait for breath.

The memory of Agamemnon

Ends with a body

Lying still, without companions.

Lie still, still Agamemnon.

I shall melt your gold

Or wear your mask.

FROM THE BRIDGE

From the bridge
We can touch the top-most buds
Of the elm trees
Which will triangle into leaves
In less than a month

From the bridge
We can see the stained glass
Sprinkle colored light
In our direction
Attracting us beyond

From the bridge
We can dangle out
Past the concrete railing
Before tumbling through the air
Toward the grey water

ALCHEMY

Spin metal into human forms

Stays against the storm

Hang plastic pieces upsidedown

To move on threads and sounds

Water-color river tones

Oil paint the unknown

Cuneiform yourself words

Which won't be heard--

Before your gods fall

Draw bison on the walls

ICE POINT

A coma may unveil awareness
Delirium shakes the room
Attendants carry the relative news
Visual patterns return renewed

Green sprouts from tree limbo
After fractures of ice under ice
Building begins with misplaced elements
Embryo-figures reach to unfold

AN ARRANGEMENT

1

You brought your mysticism,
Having been above and beyond. . .
You ridiculed and sounded
And were gone
 into another state of awareness. . .

He brought his myth
And marked off his space
Including you,
Then left a new pattern fading
Which is when you left,
Dazed and alarmed.

2

He had gone running down the cement wall
With chalk in his outstretched arm.
White particles settled down behind him.
Then he forgot his thoughts of territory
(He had room to),
And drew a buffalo to make his mark--
The buffalo's mark, the old wall's mark, and his.
Afterwards, he threw the chalk end over end in the air.

Turning, he had said a myth is alive--
Is the magic dust you sprinkle to create yourself,
Peter-Pan like.

And the chalkdust, the whitedust, settled behind him.

3

Arranging every artifact in a familiar way
Is easier than expecting chance to sustain you.
The once sure is now strangely unexplained.

He did the dishes and made the bed;
He planned and read;
He sorted papers and straightened pencils.

Then grabbing his chalk
He fled down the steps,
Fell to the cement and was stopped.
His fleeing done, he was mystic-magic now
If he was anything at all.

4

You had watched it all
And afterwards the tightening began,
The twisting collapse.

You were unaware of the rising memory,
The images of yellow afternoons
Offering revival.

At night you smelled
The burning leaves of Halloween--
And you dealt with change.

Later you lifted a handful of white-speckled dust
Up from the ground and threw it;
But it was ceremonial-among-the-buffalo,
It wasn't Peter-Pan.